

Mulheres Mils Impact Assessment: Building research capacity across nations

A Reflection Paper for the 2013 IDRC Canadian Learning Forum

by Holly Catalfamo, Niagara College

Name(s) of Researchers	Holly Catalfamo, hcatalfamo@niagaracollege.ca & Marti Jurman Niagara College Canada
Location of research	Brasil
Dates research conducted	April 2012-March 2014
Partner(s)	Brasil – Ministry of Education
Funder(s)	IDRC
Types of research methods used	Qualitative and quantitative research methods including surveys; semi-structured interviews; focus groups; and document analysis.
Did or will your research project lead to a second phase?	It is our hope that this project will lead to a second phase of the project.

Introduction

As the world economy continues to struggle, the role of education in building lives has never been more important. This is particularly true in developing nations where the disparities continue to grow between those with wealth and those who are socially and economically disadvantaged.

In the last 15 years, Brazil has engaged in a more persistent strategy of development and social inclusion through labour and, as such, has realized an overall increase in formal employment rates (Cardoso Jr., 2009). *Mulheres Mil* means a thousand strong women and, in 2005, it began as a collaborative project between the Association of Canadian Community Colleges (ACCC), Canadian colleges, and the federal government of Brazil.

The project was designed to provide marginalized women with access to postsecondary education, thereby offering participants life skills, in addition to educational, and vocational qualifications to help them to enter the formal labour market. The initial goal of the project was to provide training to 1,000 women to improve their quality of life and diminish their vulnerability. Based on the project's early successes, in 2011 the program was extended nation-wide with a goal of reaching 100,000 women by 2014.

In 2012, Niagara College Canada, in partnership with the government of Brazil, received a two-year research grant through the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) to research the *Mulheres Mil Impact Assessment* (MMIA). The objective of the research was to collaborate with Brazilian partners in developing tools and methodologies that would allow stakeholders to measure the impact of the Mulheres Mil (MM) program.

The Collaboration Process

Niagara College Canada has worked with the Brazilian government and *Institutes Federales* (IF) since 2005. When discussing the potential partnership to design impact assessment tools for the Mulheres Mil program, there was great enthusiasm both within Brazil and at the College.

Upon receipt of the funding, it was decided that the lead researcher would travel with members of the Canadian research team to Brazil in the spring of 2012 to meet with the national coordinator of the Mulheres Mil program, the program coordinators from 14 Mulheres Mil sites, the Ministry of Education in Brazil, and representatives from the Institutes Federales. During this visit, they planned the early stages of the project, and the lead researcher observed the program in four different cities and met with some participants at each location. This provided



Above: Natalie Tokar and Holly Catalfamo, Mulheres Mil Impact Assessment Team – Canada, Program Coordinators of the Mulheres Mil program in Brasilia and program participants. Brasilia, Brasil. May of 2012.

insight into the program's structure and about the existing evaluative tools in place in different areas of Brazil.

Upon return to Canada, the Canadian and Brazilian teams planned the key milestones and deliverables, and strategized how to use video conferencing, teleconferencing and the internet to continue the momentum of the project.

In 2013, the Brazilian researchers came to Canada for a week, to participate in a *Research Development Forum* to collaborate, share best practices in research methodologies and evaluative frameworks, identify and develop impact indicators as well as draft tools and methodologies that will be piloted in Brazil in the fall of 2013. It is important to note that early work had taken place during the 2012 workshops to identify impact indicators in a collaborative manner drawing on the expertise of the Mulheres Mil program coordinators.

Reflections on Research Excellence

Research excellence is fundamental to the success of the MMIA and will have an important impact on the MM program as well. Our experience confirms that research must be grounded in a scholarly process and employ a careful, methodological approach that adheres to high standards of academic rigour. Data analysis should be comprehensive, and, perhaps most importantly, the research process must adhere to ethical requirements in every possible way. A rigorous ethics process serves as the foundation upon which research excellence must be built.

The project also demonstrated five other aspects of research excellence:

Contribution to Knowledge:

Neuman & Robson (2009) recommend, when conducting social research, investigators should look to *learn something new about the social world*. They observe that people combine a set of principles, outlooks, and methodologies, with a method of inquiry to produce knowledge and that “it requires persistence, personal integrity, tolerance for ambiguity, interaction with others, and pride in doing quality work” (p. 2).

Relevance to needs of the communities:

Brazil is developing at a rapid pace, but there remains considerable economic and social disparity among its citizens, particularly women. For this project to be successful, full consideration must be given to the needs of the women and their families, the *Institutes Federales* that provide the programming, and the broader communities in which the participants live. The project will provide the Brazilian government with tools to assess the *Mulheres Mil* program in a comprehensive and consistent manner and to determine to what extent it is realizing its objectives. It will also assess the impact the program is having on key stakeholders. The perspective of those researched, in particular the women of the *Mulheres Mil* program, must be given full consideration. They must be provided a real voice in the process.

Impact on Policy:

This bi-national research project will have a significant **impact on policy** in Brazil as it relates to the *Mulheres Mil* program. The Ministry of Education in Brazil had identified a research gap in the capacity to collect statistically relevant data on the impact of the program which now has a goal of reaching 100,000 women. By collaboratively developing a solid research framework and appropriate methods to analyze the impacts of the *Mulheres Mil* program, policy-makers will have access to more comprehensive data as they expand the program nation-wide. Identification of key communication strategies will be essential to ensure that policy-makers review the data and fully understand its implications.

Impact on Practice:

The MMIA project will reveal significant data related to the implementation of the Mulheres Mil program and, as such, best practices will be developed through careful data analysis. In addition, the data will identify potential gaps within the program where modifications may be advisable. As the program is expanded to institutions across the country, it is important to examine the program with a view to improving its day-to-day operations. Ongoing data analysis will be critical to program monitoring in the future. Developing systematic methodologies in order to collect, communicate, and act upon the data will be critical in order to impact practice.

Collaboration

During the planning of this project, great care was taken to ensure that there was full collaboration between the Brazilian and Canadian research teams and that key stakeholders in the project were consulted on an ongoing basis, for example, through comprehensive interviews with program-delivery staff throughout Brazil. These initial workshops were co-facilitated with project team members from Canada and 14 front-line Mulheres Mil program coordinators from 14 sites across Brazil. In addition, the lead researcher and members of the project team met with program staff, community partners, participants, graduates and members of their families to gain insight into their experiences.

Each phase of the project was collaboratively planned with the bi-national research team and project roles were clearly defined. In addition, both Brazilian and Canadian researchers completed a comprehensive review of relevant scholarly work that informed the research design and analysis. Stakeholders from different government agencies provided insight into the program's current and future goals. During each step of the research project, ongoing collaboration among key stakeholders who fully understand the *Mulheres Mil* program has ensured that the project maintains its relevance and provides a solid foundation to influence both policy and practice.

Finally, the collaborative process during this project has been extremely positive with no instances of conflict. Despite cultural and institutional differences, the Canadian and Brazilian team members have been sensitive to one another's roles throughout the project without having to compromise the overall project goals or commitment to academic standards. The Canadian and Brazilian ethical review process is equally rigorous and all researchers are dedicated to a process that is respectful of research excellence.

Despite very strong collaboration, in retrospect, an opportunity existed to include Mulheres Mil participants as an ongoing and active part of the project team. This may have provided an opportunity to give more significant voice to the women of the program and also help shape the research methodology. It would remind the researchers to consistently re-evaluate their position of privilege and be conscientious of the needs of the participants at all times.

Challenges

The project faced several challenges that required both patience and resilience to overcome, including:

- **Scheduling Meetings:** Meeting dates in Brazil and Canada were periodically out of synch due to differences in vacation periods.
- **Communication technology:** Once dates for videoconferences were established, the videoconferencing equipment did not always work. Teleconferencing became the inevitable back-up plan; however, the loss of the face-to-face engagement should be noted.
- **Delays in obtaining visas:** While both the Brazilian and Canadian teams planned actively for the Brazilian visit to Canada, unanticipated delays occurred with visa approvals. This delayed the travel dates for some of the Brazilian research team and potentially threatened the ability to complete the development of the research tools. However, upon arrival the entire research team worked long hours to ensure that all members were up-to-date on the progress made and team members worked tirelessly to ensure that the tools and methodologies were completed within the scheduled timelines.
- **Language & cultural differences:** The issue of language should also be discussed. Workshops in 2012 and the Research Development Forum in 2013 required significant investment in time and energy in translation services. Such translation services were absolutely essential to the ultimate success of the project; however, it is important to recognize that the translation of documents between English and Portuguese takes considerable time. It was critical to find skilled translators who capture the subtleties of the translation in terms of cultural meaning and context. In addition, the recognition of cultural differences between Canadians and Brazilians is important. The project team was fortunate from the onset to have team members who had lived and/or travelled extensively in Brazil and had briefed the Canadian project team extensively on cultural differences and the importance of taking time to establish trust among the research partners. Facilitation tools and activities at each workshop were used to provide researchers the opportunity to get to know one another on a personal level in order to build strong interpersonal connections. Once these relationships had formed, Brazilian partners were extremely forthcoming by sharing their knowledge and experiences. Some of the Brazilian program coordinators provided electronic copies of documents and statistical tracking data for Mulheres Mil that they may not have been willing to share with the Canadian team if not for the trust that had been fostered between the Canadian and Brazilian partners. This clearly enhanced the research design experience by

providing a more comprehensive understanding of the broader research context critical to research excellence.

- **Changes in Team Members:** Unforeseen circumstances resulted in team members changing in both Brazil and Canada. In Canada, although the lead researcher has stayed with the project, one of the research partners left Niagara College to pursue another role in international work; another left for a personal leave. These leaves were unpreventable and consistency was maintained with the lead researcher in Canada. In Brazil, the national program coordinator provided leadership for the Brazilian team throughout the project, although the original group brought together in the spring of 2012 was different than the final research team that came to Canada in the summer of 2013. It was important to be respectful of our partner's need to identify the individuals with the appropriate research expertise to follow the research through to completion. However, these changes required taking the time necessary to establish new relationships and allow everyone 'catch up' on the project's progress. In retrospect, the final team that has come together has the appropriate balance of project management, research and program expertise which has provided a very solid foundation for the development of the research tools and methodology.



Above: The Brazilian – Canadian MMIA Research Team shared a collaborative and productive week in August of 2013 in Niagara-on-the-Lake Canada. Included in the photo are: Kirsten Kennedy, Ania Tamlis da Silva, Jussara Maysa Silva Campos, Lyn Ogryzlo, Holly Catalfamo, Marilise Esteves, Nara Souza, Clarice Monteiro Escott, Maria Jose Resende de Ferreira, and Marti Jurmain. .

Key Learning

As the project is moving into its final phases, the importance of collaboration has emerged as a key theme, which reflects a significant trend towards increased collaboration in international research (Adams, Gurney, & Marshall, 2007; Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada, 2009). Although this was not an explicit research criterion at the onset of the project, in retrospect, it is a criterion that should be given greater consideration in international research.

Successful collaboration requires equality and understanding. As Canadian researchers, it would be presumptuous to impose a Canadian approach to the process and assume that we have a full understanding of the Brazilian context. The success of this research has been dependent upon a full and equal partnership, thoughtful collaboration, and sensitivity to cultural, institutional, and political differences. Throughout the project, reciprocity in learning has been abundant and provides a significant learning which will enhance capacity building in research excellence across nations. Greater access to frameworks detailing the process of collaboration would be useful for researchers. International research, particularly development research, should increasingly give consideration to the criterion of collaboration. In order to develop tools and processes that will appropriately inform policy and practice, authentic collaboration is critical. Lessons learned should be shared among researchers, best practices celebrated, and potential challenges explored.

Epilogue

This Learning Forum provided a very valuable opportunity to learn and grow through rich dialogue and a well-facilitated learning exchange. It has helped to raise new questions, and perhaps shape a new understanding of research excellence recognizing the complexities of our dynamic research environments that involve many diverse stakeholders.

One question that emerged for this researcher was whether there are, or should be, different definitions of research excellence depending on the nature of the research, particularly for community-based research. Given that there is a distinction between knowledge for understanding and knowledge for action, it is arguable that additional criteria should be considered in defining and promoting research excellence in development contexts. Research excellence for development is, or should be, rigorous, adhering to the foundational standards of ethics that are reflective of our training and values as researchers.

However, the Learning Forum inspired me to see knowledge for action as enhancing capacity building and helping communities create the capacity to act. Identifying and defining criteria that reflect these concepts will be a valuable support to development researchers. The Learning Forum provided an excellent opportunity to discuss and debate this important consideration when defining and striving for research excellence.

Another significant theme emerging for me was related to the notion of effective communication. At the beginning of the project, it would have been helpful to clearly identify the different audiences for this research. Although assumptions were made, the MMIA project would have definitely have benefited from project partners having a thorough conversation with all stakeholders in order to identify each of the different audiences in Canada and Brazil and then to develop, and follow, a systematic communication strategy. This strategy should have included a multitude of communication channels that embraced creativity and reflected the needs of each audience. Dedicating specific project partners to these roles is essential. Moving forward, future research activities will include this specific approach ensuring that all stakeholders, including research participants, are engaged in this communication plan from the onset.

In closing, it is important to state that the Learning Forum experience has indeed been invaluable to me as a relatively new researcher working on my first development project. I have learned so much from my new colleagues at IDRC and the Learning Forum and will ensure that these lessons are applied as this project comes to conclusion and in all my future research pursuits.

I would also like to acknowledge my partners at Niagara College, Marti Jurmain, Niagara Research and Niagara International, who have been instrumental throughout this journey. Our project partners in Brasil, the MMIA Brazilian project team, have been inspirational. They work tirelessly to change the lives of so many women living in poverty and, most importantly, provide the gift of hope to the women of the Mulheres Mil program for a better tomorrow.

References

Adams, J., Gurney, K., and Marshall S. (2007). *Patterns of international collaboration for the UK and leading partners* (Summary report). Leeds, UK: Evidence Ltd.

Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada (2009). *International Research Collaboration*. Retrieved September 7th, 2013, from <http://www.aucc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2011/05/International-Research-Collaboration.pdf>.

Cardoso Junior, Jose Celso (ouubro-dezembro/2009). Determinantes da recuperacao do emprego formal no Brsil: evidencias para o period 2001/2005 e hipoteses para uma agenda de pesuisa. *Revista de Economia Política*, 29(4), 357-376.

Neuman, W. L. and Robson, K. (2009). *Basics of Social Research: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches*. Toronto: Pearson Education Canada.